



## **State Senator Beverly Powell**

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**ICYMI: *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* Feature on Senator Beverly Powell**

***"Why Tarrant County's newest senator is getting high marks from her colleagues"***

**AUSTIN, TX**—On Sunday, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* published a feature on Senator Powell's first 37 days in the Texas Legislature. The article highlights Senator Powell's priorities for the 86th Texas Legislative Session.

*Star-Telegram* columnist Dave Montgomery described Sen Powell's priorities such as the need to champion for public schools, expand healthcare access, further economic development in Tarrant County and in Texas, including workforce training, and defending local control.

### **Why Tarrant County's newest senator is getting high marks from her colleagues by: Dave Montgomery**

AUSTIN -- It's Day 37 into her new career as a state senator from Tarrant County and Beverly Powell is midway through a typically packed day.

The schedule includes a 65-minute-long session in the Senate chamber and a meeting in Gov. Greg Abbott's office to discuss his flagship proposal to cap property taxes. There are also meetings with business leaders and a group of ophthalmologists from Tarrant County.

On this particular day in mid-February, Powell's office was still a work in progress. "We've gotten stuff sitting around that we haven't hung on the walls," she said. "We've decided that hanging pictures is not our priority right now."

The Burleson real estate developer and former school board president began outlining just what those priorities are well over a year ago when she entered the District 10 Senate race. Now, after more than six weeks in office, the Democratic senator says she is working ambitiously to fulfill them.

Education — particularly fixing the state's broken school finance system — tops the list, along with health care. She is also a strong advocate for economic development and workforce training and a fierce defender of "local control" — short-hand for protecting local and county governments from overreach and unfunded mandates by the state.

“We’re staying vigilant and focused on what we think is important to Tarrant County,” Powell said in a recent interview in her office. “Just like every other senator is focused on what they think is important to their districts.”

The 67-year-old Senate freshman has earned high marks from members of both parties for doing her homework, displaying a robust work ethic and being informed on the issues. “I’m getting to know her and she works hard,” said Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, who represents part of Tarrant County and chairs the Senate Finance Committee.

Much of the Senate’s business thus far has focused on benign resolutions and honoring visitors in the gallery but controversies are undoubtedly lurking just around the corner. School finance tops the must-do list but a thicket of other issues, from public health to criminal justice, awaits lawmakers’ attention between now and the May 27 adjournment.

Since taking office with the start of the 86th Legislature on Jan. 8, Powell has quickly emerged as an up-and-comer among legislative Democrats. She was tapped to be part of the Democratic response to Abbott’s Feb. 5 State of the State Address, speaking on the need for local control, and has embraced top Democratic priorities such as expansion of Medicaid and increased state funding for education.

Powell has also signaled her likely intention to oppose a 2.5 percent cap on property taxes, one of the Republican leadership’s signature issues and a top priority for the governor. She was one of four senators — and the only Democrat — whom Abbott invited to his office on Feb. 13 to discuss the proposal.

“She is a great addition to the Senate, and we’re looking for great things from her,” said Sen. Jose Rodriguez of El Paso, chairman of the Senate Democratic Caucus. “She’s going to play a leadership role. She’s got that type of background.”

Powell became an instant hero among fellow Democrats by defeating Republican Konni Burton of Colleyville in the Nov. 6 election to return the district to Democratic control after Burton’s four years in the Senate. Democrat Wendy Davis, who made an unsuccessful bid for governor against Abbott in 2014, held the seat from 2009 to 2015.

District 10 stretches along the southern half of Tarrant County, encompassing parts of Fort Worth, Arlington, Mansfield and Colleyville and a diverse demographic mix of more than 834,00 residents. It has a statewide reputation as one of Texas’ few “swing” districts that can’t be counted on to reliably vote Republican or Democratic.

Powell and her family have deep roots in the district. She grew up on a 300-acre farm outside Burleson that her family later converted into a successful real estate enterprise, spawning Powell’s future career as a Realtor and developer.

Her father, Don Volkman, was a defense worker and decorated World War II veteran who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and other major conflicts. Her mother, Donna Volkman, was a girls basketball coach and Texas history teacher whom Powell credits for instilling her with a deep passion for education.

Charlie Powell, the senator's husband of 18 years, is a well-known Fort Worth banker and philanthropist who is board chairman of the JPS Health Network.

Ken Shetter, one of two sons from a previous marriage, is Burleson's mayor. Powell was on the Burleson school board for 10 years, serving as president from 2011-2013, and is the immediate past board chairman of Texas Wesleyan University.

The Tarrant County senator was one of two Democrats who ousted Republican incumbents from the Senate in a Democratic surge on election night. The other newcomer is lawyer and composer Nathan Johnson of Dallas.

As a result, Democrats hold 12 seats compared to 19 for Republicans. GOP members have just enough votes to pass legislation without the help of Democrats but if only one Republican defects, then Democrats dictate the outcome because 19 votes are needed to consider legislation.

The mathematics became acutely obvious last week when Republican maverick Sen. Kel Seliger of Amarillo, who has fallen out of favor with Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Senate's presiding officer, served notice that he plans to oppose Senate legislation containing the 2.5 percent tax cap being pushed by Abbott, Patrick and other Republican leaders.

City and county leaders, including Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price and Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, both Republicans, are vehemently pushing against the cap, saying it could have a disastrous impact on their ability to raise revenue and fund vital government services. Powell has also underscored those concerns as part of her vow to fend off efforts to weaken local control in the Legislature.

"Attempts to expand the power and the reach of government here in Austin threaten the success of our municipalities and our counties," she said at a Feb. 5 press conference attended by Senate and House Democrats just after Abbott's State of the State speech to a joint session in the House chamber.

School district property taxes — which fund an increasing share of Texas' public education costs — have become a critical focal point of this year's legislative session as part of the effort to overhaul the barely constitutional school finance system. Powell, who has experienced the issue up close as a former school board member, said she believes the answer to fixing the system is to increase funding from the state.

In the nearly 50-minute interview in her office, she strongly hinted that she is prepared to vote against the cap as proposed in Senate Bill 2, which advanced out of the Republican-led Senate Property Tax

Committee. “It’s going to be interesting to see how that conversation shakes out and it won’t be a surprise to anyone that I have not been a proponent of tax caps.”

Powell has introduced eight bills, one of which could put her at the center of a perennially contentious battle over economic incentives used by local governments to attract business and manufacturing.

The so-called Chapter 312 agreements, named for the authorizing provision in the tax code, allow cities, counties and special districts to offer temporary property tax reductions lasting up to 10 years to induce new investment such as manufacturing facilities.

The incentives are scheduled to expire this year, but Powell’s Senate Bill 350 would remove the expiration date and permanently continue the economic tool.

Business and manufacturing groups say the incentives, which have been used extensively in North Texas, are vital for continuing the state’s economic growth but opponents, including the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank in Austin, have denounced them as a form of corporate welfare.

As part of her efforts to find more money for education, Powell has also introduced Senate Bill 832 to create a lottery game that would raise revenue specifically to fund pre-kindergarten programs.

She has proposed an expansion of a skills development program under the Texas Workforce Commission and is co-author of a constitutional amendment proposed by Sen. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, to dedicate sales taxes from sporting goods for the upkeep of state parks and historic sites.

Patrick, beginning his second four-year term as lieutenant governor, assigned Powell to four committees that should enhance her effectiveness to deal with her priority issues on education, health and economic development. She serves on the education committee, higher education committee, health and human services committee and natural resources and economic development committee.

Despite their partisan and philosophical differences, Powell says she has had a good relationship with the Senate’s presiding officer. Patrick called her within days after her election. They’ve also met in his office and chatted on the Senate floor.

“He’s always been very kind and generous,” Powell said. “I’m appreciative of my committee assignments, because it’s really obvious that he looked at my résumé, thought about my qualifications to serve in both public ed and higher ed. I’m very grateful for the opportunity to do that.”

Powell has also steadily forged relationships with fellow senators. She sits on the front row not far from the Senate podium, between Democrat Jose Menendez of San Antonio and Republican Bryan Hughes of Mineola.

Seliger, who was stripped from a committee chairmanship over remarks Patrick said the senator made about a senior aide, recalled that he and Powell met for a lunch that he initiated before the session to talk “about process ... and kind of how things work.”

“She’ll coalesce beautifully,” said the former Amarillo mayor. “The most important thing is that she feels free to call any of the members and ask whatever it is that’s of interest or concern to her.”

Powell is also working with the predominately Republican 11-member Tarrant County delegation in the House.

One close ally is Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, the House Democratic leader who helped in her campaign. Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, a high-profile member of the Tea Party-supported Texas Freedom Caucus, said he and Powell have discussed potential legislation they can jointly support in spite of their differences.

“Tarrant County has a long history of once the elections are over of getting together and trying to do things that benefit our community,” said Stickland, who supported Burton over Powell in the Senate race. “I think in general she’s for more big government than I am ... but we’re trying very hard to find things that we do agree on to move the ball forward.”

As she assesses the opening weeks of her legislative service, Powell says he has found the Senate to be “a very caring body” made up of members driven “by a motive to do the right thing for our citizens.”

And, she adds, “it was immediately clear to me that this is a new part of my family.”

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